

Link with our Hinterland heritage



Phyllis & Isabella in front of Pioneer Cottage when it formed part of Erowal farm.

The Maleny Pioneer Cottage was the home of Isabella, Phyllis and Marjorie Bryce, daughters of pioneer dairy farmer and cattle judge, Ben, and Priscilla Bryce.

It was originally called Erowal, after the property in southern NSW bought in 1854 by Ben's father, Alexander, and uncle William, who emigrated from Scotland. Tradition has it that it means "here a while".

The house, now called Priscilla, was moved to its present site to commemorate the centenary of Federation after the Bryce farmland was donated to the Uniting Church for retirement units and then a nursing home.

Maleny's Isabella was named after her grandmother, Isabella Watt, who was born in 1832 in Scotland. She married Alexander Bryce (1822-1898) in 1851 and they emigrated to Australia with Alexander's brother, William, and his bride, in 1852. Two years later they bought Erowal House, south of Nowra. They were soon joined by their older sister, Ann Bryce, and her husband, Malcolm Mathie.

The property was originally called Errowel but this became Erowal over time, a name commemorated in Old Erowal Village in the St Georges Basin, near the original grant.

The Bryce's came to Maleny when five of Alexander and Isabella's 12 children and two grandchildren, Alexander Fleming (born 1882) and Isabella (1884) who married Arthur Thomason, children of their eldest daughter, Marion (1860-1885), began the move to Queensland after Alexander senior died in 1898.

The youngest, Charles Bryce, (1878-1955), local identity Ian Bryce's forbear, came in 1900, followed by Alexander (1852-1940), William (1858-1927) and Benjamin (1872-1944) during 1903. Robert (1870-1950) came with his wife, Annie Gibson and their four children in 1906.

Charles acquired land from Landsborough hotel owner Isaac Burgess, Maleny's first selector, who had taken up a grant in 1878.

He started building Erowal, helped by Ben. The house was completed in 1906. White beech timber was cut from the property and sent to Pattermore and Thynne's sawmill at Fryers Creek, where it was pitsawn. The mouldings and skirting boards came from Brisbane by rail and some still have the transport instructions written on them.

Small though the house is, the four-roomed cottage was built in two stages, the first with red cedar window frames with handmade glass and V-jointed, hand-planed boards, and the second silky oak window frames and machine-planed tongue-and-groove boards.

Alexander, the oldest son, enthusiastic local historian Harvey Bryce's greatgrandfather, took up land in Reesville. He left the farm in 1905 but the following year his son, Alexander (AJ) came back to Reesville, where Harvey's father, William, was born.

Ben and Charles had exchanged properties and their mother moved in with Ben. She lived there until she died in 1922. By then Ben had married and had three daughters and matriarch Isabella often took grandchildren under her wing.

By the time Ben Bryce was courting Priscilla Bridge his eyesight was failing but they were married in 1913, when he was 41 and Priscilla 33. Sisters Priscilla, Maud and Dora Bridge had come to stay with their sister Nellie, who was working in Maleny, and they all married local men. Their descendants – the Butts, Bryces and Smiths - still live in the district. Isabella, Ben Bryce's eldest daughter, was born November 8, 1914, then Phyllis (December 17, 1916) and Marjorie (March 10, 1922).

Despite his blindness, Ben remained an active farmer until finally succumbing to cancer in 1944 after five years of dedicated nursing by his wife and daughters.

He had stepping-stone paths laid out over his property and with the help of Isabella ran his dairy farm and produced prizewinning cattle.

From when she was just four years old, Isabella would sit astride the packhorse in front of her father and guide the horse carrying the cream to the butter factory in Maleny.

She left school at 14 and the farm and her family became Isabella's life. When her father died she took over the running of the property, with Phyllis doing the household tasks, including dressmaking, with the help of Marjorie. The sisters bought a neighbour's orchard, driving round in a horse and cart to collect the fruit.

'We had to learn to pack fruit and send it to the markets in Brisbane. It was quite a lot of learning but we did it quite well. We had to pick the fruit, then we had to hand grade them. We could have done with another pair of hands each.'

Isabella Bryce

Isabella was a canny businesswoman and a new property in Montville more than paid for itself from the first cut of timber. In 1958 she and their farm hand, Bob Pointing, who had been with them since starting on the farm at 14 in 1939, cut out the track to get cattle up to the main road. That track is now the access road to Baroon Pocket Dam.

Years later, Isabella Bryce recalled, "If you go to Western Avenue there was a gazetted road down to the dam and that was in our paddock. Maroochy Shire Council said if you want to bring the cattle up, you've got to brush the track yourself.

"We had Bob Pointing working for us – he was a wonderful worker – and I said we'd have to find the bottom peg of the road. Then we took a line up. We just sighted by our eyes. It's awfully steep. I brushed the lantana up that hill, great thick lantana, with a brushhook."

By the time they acquired a farm at Mt Mellum the sisters were also raising beef cattle and they then bought acreage between Palmwoods and Woombye. When Isabella was in her sixties she got a pension and sold off their other farms, just keeping Erowal. In 1976, the Bryce sisters wanted a little more comfort than the old home provided. As Isabella explained, "We had a bit of money to build and the old house was a bit cold and airy in winter so we thought we'd like a brick house."

The council, however, would not give permission for a separate house but they did gain approval for an extension, joined to the old cottage by a carport.

All this work did not stop Isabella and Priscilla being active in the life of the community, from playing the organ in church to being founding members of many key organisations and starting Pony Riding for the Disabled in 1980. Isabella was a Rotary Paul Harris Fellow and both sisters spent a lifetime working for the Red Cross. They both got Radio 4NA community service awards in 1977 and British Empire Medals in 1984.

Marjorie died in 1977 and Phyllis and Isabella decided to give money and land to the community for a retirement village. Their mother, Priscilla, had suffered a major stroke and was bedbound for some time before she died aged 91. Because they had to keep the farms going, the sisters had asked their neighbours to help with her care. "But nobody would come and look in on her at dinnertime, not one person," Isabella recalled towards the end of her life.

The sisters eventually settled on the Uniting Church – the family had first attended the Union Church, which members of the Bryce family helped build on the corner of Myrtle and Coral Streets, then the Presbyterians and finally the Uniting Church.

Phyllis suffered a major stroke and died in 1985 Isabella herself moved into the Erowal retirement village in 1988. She did not marry until 1992– when she and the groom, Morden (Mort) George Wright, 80, were living in the Uniting Church's Boyanda Hostel in Maleny, officially opened by Senator Gerry Jones the same week.

They had met 10 years before at the Maleny Calf and Cattle Sales, of which Isabella was the convenor, and after Mort's first wife died they snatched a few moments courting over in the Bryce cow shed as Isabella did the milking.

They were both living at the hostel when Mort proposed in March 1992. They were married at the local Uniting Church on August 1 and spent their honeymoon at the hostel.

Isabella had a stroke in 1992 and died on March 15, 2000.

Sisters gift to their community

The Erowal name was taken over by the retirement village, built on land named Ben Bryce Park. After Isabella and Phyllis, who continued to live at the adjacent Erowal, donated land to the Uniting Church's Centres for Retirement Living (CRL) in 1980, work began on the first four units and Phyllis became secretary of the retirement village committee.

A 53-bed hostel was then built, with an additional 10-bed wing in 1992.

The site selected for a \$3-million, 26-bed nursing facility was where Isabella's old home stood. The brick house was demolished and the Maleny History Preservation and Restoration Society Inc moved the original homestead to its present position in Bryce Lane, still part of the original land holding but across the main road.

The two high-care lodges were completed in 1999, with Isabella, who had suffered a stroke in 1992, becoming the first resident.

The sisters could be said to have lived a hard life but they supported each other and were active in community, despite the burden of caring for their father during his long illness, and then for their mother Priscilla.

The Bryces never threw anything out and when the new building was complete the sisters moved out of the cottage leaving everything as it was so that when Isabella gave the old home to the community it was full of the family possessions.

The Maleny History Preservation and Restoration Society Inc, formed in 1993, moved it across the Maleny-Landsborough Road with the help of more than 200 local volunteers to land Isabella had also given to the Uniting Church. In 1998 the society gained grants to fund its restoration and on January 15, 2000 it was the venue for a Bryce family reunion.

The society, which has many Bryce descendants as well as those of other pioneer families among its members, has arranged the house much as it was when the three sisters lived there, with their dresses, furniture and mementos, a fitting memorial to the hardworking pioneer Maleny families.

'When the pioneer cottage was moved, the only alterations required to comply with the current building code and cyclone proofing were two collar ties in the roof.

The roof, when constructed, was one of the earliest forms of trusses and the framework was mortise and tenon.

The white beech framework was intact, although one section bearer needed replacing and there was slight water damage from the laundry.

The lead-head nails have been replaced with modern screws.'

Harvey Bryce

Lois Miles, September 2003